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ABSTRACT

This discussion focuses on examples of materials used at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) to help convey cultural values in the Japanese component in the Language and International Trade and the Language and World Business Programs at EMU. Ways that the culture is incorporated into the Japanese curriculum are described, and an explanation is given on why instructional materials are needed to systematically introduce the basic principles of performing Japanese culture. Cultural competency is emphasized in EMU's business Japanese. Core courses include the following: problems that Americans often encounter when negotiating with Japanese business people; how to compete in the Japanese market by understanding foreign company case studies and by studying Japanese business customs and practices; and communicating and working in a Japanese company. A few examples of instructional materials are provided to illustrate school/social life and business/culture situations. EMU's cultural proficiency and placement test is described briefly. (LB)

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DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS TO IMPROVE AND TEST COMPETENCY IN JAPANESE BUSINESS CULTURE

A Paper to be presented
at 11th Annual Conference on Languages and Communication
for World Business and the Professions
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The primary goal of the Japanese component in the Language and International Trade Program and the Language and World Business Program at Eastern Michigan University is to prepare students to be able to effectively communicate, deal and/or work with Japanese business people. Effective communication requires both language proficiency and cultural proficiency. The paper briefly describes how "small c" culture is incorporated into the EMU's Japanese curriculum and explains why instructional materials are needed to *systematically* introduce the *basic* principles of performing Japanese culture. The purpose of this paper is to present a few examples of such materials which are to be used along with Japanese language textbooks especially for beginning and intermediate Japanese classes at EMU.

Cultural Proficiency

Effective communication between people in different cultures requires not only language skills but also a mutual understanding of each other's culture. In this post-Cold War era, many Americans and Japanese perceive each other as an adversary more than an ally, threatening to its national security. As the U.S. and Japan have become increasingly interdependent, they have begun to pay more attention to costs of interdependence rather than to its benefits. The problem is that neither side has done enough to appreciate the increased stakes shared by the two economic superpowers. Managing the increasing interdependence requires not only understanding of issues at stake but also greater efforts to

appreciate differences--and similarities--in the ways that Americans and Japanese think, communicate, behave and look at each other.

Recently, many Japanese programs at U.S. universities have shifted their focus from Japanese literature to the aquisition of language skills. Unfortunately, many of the programs have been so preoccupied with improving linguistic proficiency in spoken Japanese that they failed to systematically introduce culture (culture here refers to "small c" culture including shared values beliefs, customs and institutions, not "Big C" culture of literary classics and works of art). Achieving a certain level of oral proficiency in Japanese language must be accompanied by a corresponding level of competency in Japanese culture. Competency in Japanese business culture is essential to effectively communicate, deal and/or work with the Japanese. The cultural proficiency means to understand, among other things, how and why Japanese people think and behave differently, and to perform the culture. Although it is not very likely to achieve a high level of proficiency in Japanese culture without learning the language, it not only is possible but often happens that students learn the language only to achieve a poor proficiency in Japanese culture. When it comes to proficiency in Japanese *business* culture, studying the language and culture in Japan does not seem to help much unless the study of business culture is incorporated in the curriculum. Japanese business people in the U.S. often complain that their new recruits who have studied Japanese at college

perform very poorly especially in interpersonal relations because they know little about Japanese business culture. Some even suggest that they would prefer graduates who are familiar with Japanese business culture even though they speak little Japanese.

Japanese Curriculum at EMU

Cultural competency is emphasized in EMU's business Japanese, the core courses of which are JPN 361 Japanese for International Trade, JPN 446 Business Japanese I, and JPN 447 Business Japanese II. JPN 361 and JPN 447 are courses on Japanese business culture taught in Japanese instead of language classes that also introduce culture. JPN 361 focuses on problems that Americans often encounter when negotiating with Japanese business people. JPN 447 explores how to compete in the Japanese market by studying cases of successes and failures that foreign companies have made as well as business customs and practices in Japan. JPN 446 focuses on how to communicate and work with Japanese in a Japanese company--beginning with a lesson on how to have a job interview in Japanese. Instructional materials in Japanese have been developed specifically for these three courses; they introduce topics systematically that help students to learn how to effectively communicate, deal and work with the Japanese. Other instructional materials such as video and reading materials in English are also used to enhance competency in Japanese business culture.

Even though cultural competency has been emphasized in

beginning and intermediate Japanese classes, culture has not yet been systematically incorporated in these classes. The reasons are that (1) priority has been given to the development of the above-mentioned business Japanese courses and their instructional materials and (2) satisfactory materials are not available that are designed to systematically introduce the basic principles of *performing* Japanese culture. In these classes culture has been introduced in relation to the language lessons; for instance, Japanese status consciousness is briefly discussed when different levels of politeness in speech are explained. The lack of proper instructional materials in English is a serious problem when culture is to be systematically incorporated. Since these lower-level Japanese classes are taught by different faculty members and part-time lecturers, they need not only a coordinated teaching strategy but also the same materials to introduce culture.

There is another reason why we need such instructional materials. More than half of our students in the third-year and forth-year Japanese courses are transfer students from other colleges and universities. As transfer students increase, we are becoming aware that many of them who have been placed in the third-year classes seem to have a cultural proficiency level lower than others, regardless of their linguistic proficiency. There have been some transfer students whose attitudes and behaviors were a little offensive to Japanese instructors because of their lack of competency in performing Japanese culture. Usually it requires instructors' special attention and extra time

to have them realize the significance of performing culture for effective communication. It will be of great help therefore, to both instructors and students if there is an English textbook to systematically introduce the basic principles of performing Japanese culture. In the following I will present a few examples that will be included in the instructional materials I am developing--which is tentatively called *Nihonbunka no Jissen* or *Performing Japanese Culture.* These examples are cases based on real or realistic situations to illustrate questions and problems Americans often encounter when they communicate, deal and/or work with the Japanese. These cases will be divided into two categories: (1) school and social life and (2) business culture.

CASE 1. CLASSROOM MANNERS

People: a. Students in a second-year Japanese class at Southern Michigan University.

b. Mr. Yamada, a 56-year old professor of Japanese literature, visiting the university from Japan through a faculty exchange program. This is his first time to teach Japanese at a U.S. university.

Place: Classroom.

Situation:

This is the third meeting of JPN 201 Intermediate Japanese. Professor Yamada gave a short quiz. One of the students who

finished the quiz early stretched her arm forward with the quiz sheet in her hand, suggesting that the professor come to get it. After the quiz, Professor Yamada found a couple of students drinking soft drinks and one student chewing gum while practicing some expressions. When the professor was explaining grammar, one student was listening with his feet on the top of his desk. At this point Professor Yamada stopped his lecture and told the class that some attitudes and behaviors he observed would be considered in Japan as rude and disrespectful to the instructor. Then, some students argued that those behaviors are not necessarily considered rude and disrespectful. They also pointed out that when they took JPN 101 Beginning Japanese last year, their instructor, Ms. Suzuki, did not say anything about those behaviors in the classroom. Ms. Suzuki is a native speaker of Japanese who received a M.A. degree in linguistics from an American university. While this discussion went on, one student left the classroom without telling the professor why she had to leave early.

Questions to Ponder

1. What do you think of the students' behaviors described above?
2. Why didn't Ms. Suzuki say anything about her students' behaviors in JPN 101? Does she think that those behaviors are not rude and disrespectful to her?

Comments

Japan is a status conscious society. Students are expected to show deference to their teachers; so are younger people, to older people. Ms. Suzuki would agree that some of the students' behaviors are considered disrespectful to instructors in Japan. (This does not mean, of course, that all Japanese students behave in such manners as to show respect to their teachers; there is always a gap between ideology and reality.) One difference between Ms. Suzuki and Mr. Yamada is that the former is much more familiar with how American students behave in the classroom. She may have become used to, for example, their eating and drinking during class. Mr. Yamada is, on the other hand, an older, male Japanese professor who is more used to deference shown by students in Japan.

Another possible difference between the two instructors might lie in the ways they look at cultural competency. Some instructors of Japanese in the U.S. let their students behave as "normally" as they do in any other classes as long as they do not interfere with instruction or other students' learning and practice. They are often more concerned with improving students' linguistic skills than making them observe some Japanese sets of rules and norms. After all, they are not in Japan. Other instructors think that a foreign language class should be different from other classes that use the lecture format. They strongly beleive that it is essential to foreign language instruction that students learn to *perform* its target culture. As learners' oral proficiency levels improve, they are expected

by the Japanese to have corresponding competency in Japanese culture and to behave accordingly. Achieving a level of oral proficiency in Japanese might do more harm than good if it is not accompanied by an equivalent level of competency in performing Japanese culture. Those instructors who emphasize cultural proficiency believe they should simulate the cultural environment of Japan in the classroom as much as possible. If Professor Yamada had had much experience in teaching in American school environments, he might have explained, on the first meeting, the significance of cultural proficiency and the rules to observe in his class.

CASE X YES OR NO?

People: a. Mr. Johnson, a sales manager of AM Corp, an American company that is looking for a distributor of its new products in Japan. He has hired an interpreter.

b. Mr. Tanaka, a section chief in the sales department of JN Corp, a Japanese company. He is accompanid by a few junior staff members.

Place: A meeting room of the Japanese company.

Situation:

Before this meeting was arranged, Johnson had been introduced to JN Corp by an executive of its "main" bank that is also a major shareholder of the Japanese company. Johnson knew that the

introducer or *shokaisha* plays an important role when contacting a Japanese company for the first time.

As Johnson was chatting with Tanaka before getting down to business, a young female employee came in and served Japanese tea to Johnson. He was never asked if he would care for coffee or something. Johnson felt like smoking.

Johnson: "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Tanaka: "Oh, yes."

Johnson: "Do you mind?"

Tanaka: "Yes, yes, please. I smoke, too."

Johnson made a well-prepared presentation emphasizing merits of becoming a distributor of AM Corp's products. The Japanese side was quietly listening to him throughout the presentation, taking notes very carefully. When Johnson talked to Tanaka, he occasionally nodded saying "yes, yes." When Johnson finished his presentation, he expected the Japanese side to ask specific questions on the products and proposed terms on distribution, but the Japanese side asked only general questions about AM Corp and Johnson himself.

Tanaka: "Kyowa oisogashi tokoro domo arigato gozaimashita. Onsha no goteianwa korekara kento sasete itadakimasu node...."

Interpreter: "Thank you for your visit and presentation. We will carefully examine your proposal."

Johnson: Taken aback by the sudden ending of the meeting, hastily says, "Don't we agree we'll have

another meeting soon?"

Tanaka: "Ee, desukara sorewa kento no uede...."

Johnson: Without waiting for the interpreter's translation, says, "Is that 'yes'?" (When he took a crash Japanese lesson before coming to Japan, Johnson learned that "ee" means "yes.")

Interpreter: "Mr. Tanaka is saying that he will let you know after examining your proposal."

Questions to Ponder

1. Why did the Japanese serve tea to Johnson without asking if he would care for something to drink?
2. Why do you think Tanaka said "yes" in English when Johnson asked, "Do you mind if I smoke?"
3. Why do you think the Japanese side did not ask specific questions on the products and terms on distribution?
4. Judging from the attitudes and behaviors of the Japanese side during Johnson's presentation, do you think that they are interested in his proposal but they need time to examine it carefully?
5. How do you explain the lack of feedback, the ambiguous response and the seemingly uncommital attitudes on the part of the Japanese side.

Comments

The Japanese are very conscious of their interdependent

relations with each other. It is considered inappropriate--especially under formal settings--to express a *personal* desire or preference openly to people other than close friends or family members without knowing or considering their desires or preferences. Expressing a personal desire or preference independent of others might harm a group harmony or a process of building consencess. When an acquaintance visits a Japanese office or home, he/she is usually served tea or coffee without being asked whether he/she would care for something to drink. It is not appropriate to ask a question that would expect an individual to express his/her personal desire or preference independent of others. If you ask a Japanese, "Kohi demo ikaga desuka (Would you care for coffee or something?)," he/she would answer, "Dozo okamainaku (Lit., Please don't bother)."

The above expression "Kohi demo ikaga desuka" would be fine if it means "How about having coffee or something with me?" because it suggest a course of action for the speaker and the hearer. When you want to ask someone, "Would you like to go to the movies with me?," you should not use the "...tai (would like to)" construction as in "Eiga ni ikitai desuka." Instead, you should use expressions suggesting that people including the hearer do something together, as in "Eiga ni ikimasenka."

The most reasonable explanation for Tanaka's saying "yes" when asked "Do you mind if I smoke" is that he translated it in his mind to mean something like "Is it all right if I smoke?" In fact, many Japanese make this mistake when you use the "Do you

mind...?" construction--saying "yes" when thay mean "No, I don't mind." Here is another type of mistakes often made by Japanese when answering "yes" or "no."

American: "Can't we agree on that?"

Japanese: "Yes. I'm sorry to say your position seems to be in parallel with ours."

Tanaka meant to say, "Yes, you're right (we can't agree). Your position is so different from ours (being apart just like two parallel lines never meet)." "Parallel" is translated as "heiko-sen" in Japanese, which also implies that two different opinions or positions are so apart from each other that they are not likely to get even a little closer.

The Japanese often nod to show that they are attentively listening whether or not they agree with you. It seems that JN Corp has little *immediate* interest in Johnson's proposal, even though Tanaka's nodding seemed to Johnson a sign of approval. However, this does not necessarily mean that it has no interest in the products or a future business relation with AM Corp. The Japanese company met Johnson because he was introduced by an important *shokaisha* (introducer) and probably because they thought there was little to lose if they met him to feel out for future business opportunities.

Generally speaking, Japanese negotiators have less authority than their American counterparts to make prompt decisions at the negotiation table. To Japanese negotiators, a business talk or negotiation is not much of an arena for bargaining or presenting

new proposals and counter-proposals; rather, it is a ground for exchanging information and conveying what has already been decided and approved internally. When Japanese companies are contacted by a company they know little of, they usually spend a lot of time checking on the company before deciding to get into serious negotiations. In the above case, it seems that the Japanese side has no choice but to refrain from making any commitment because nothing has been decided internally on whether, or how, to deal with AM Corp.

The final question: why didn't JN Corp tell Johnson that it has little immediate interest in the products if it is the case and why didn't it explain where it stands with respect to making commitment? Japanese tend to refrain from saying or doing something in public or under formal settings that they think might embarrass or offend those poeple with whom they are associated with. Japanese try to maintain harmony on the surface by avoiding, as much as possible, a straightforward negative answer, overt disagreement and open confrontation--any of which will make them feel very uneasy. If a Japanese negotiator is told, as Johnson was told, "Thank you for your visit and presentation," he would understand the situation, express their gratitude to the host, and gracefully leave the room. If JN Corp's response would not come for some time, then he would use informal channels of communication--such as contacts and *shokaisha* (introducer)--to feel out for the company's standing or decision.

Cultural Proficiency and Placement Test

As far as students in business Japanese classes at EMU are concerned, their competency in Japanese business culture are assessed with oral and/or written exams and in-class performance. For students in beginning and intermediate, the materials I am developing will be used as a basis on which assessment tools will be developed. A more difficult question will be how to assess cultural proficiency of transfer students as part of a placement test for them. Any attempt to develop some universal standards to assess levels of proficiency in Japanese culture will be premature at the present time. Whatever standards we may develop here, therefore, will be most appropriately applied only to our Japanese program at EMU. Suppose such standards are developed and used as part of a placement test. A problem will soon arise as to what we will do with students who pass the language test but fail the culture test. Should they be placed in a first-year or second-year class even though their linguistic proficiency is equal to or higher than either class? A possible solution may be to require students to take a one-credit independent study class in which they must study the same materials on Japanese culture (i.e., *Performing Japanese Culture*) and receive a satisfactory grade. This arrangement has the advantage that it will allow students to improve their cultural proficiency level without delaying their completing the Japanese program at EMU.